

# Soldier of Liberty\*

When Baldwin-Fairchild came for him, it was a warm May night, not a cloud in the sky—just the stars. The Chaplin ushered Mrs. Tyler and her daughter from the living-room and down the hallway. The boys in their clean black suits and pressed white shirts lifted Paul Tyler from his medical bed and onto the waiting gurney. Because he was a veteran, they draped the Stars and Stripes across his body. For the second time, stars were above him. In previous years they had danced around him in a wild rush of wind and fog.

There are 20 men to a stick. All 19 are my boys. I'm in the back of the line to make sure they all jump. I'm their Second Lieutenant. Good boys all, brave boys all. The Jumpmaster has dug himself in at the door.

“STAND UP!”

“HOOK UP!”

Our ride is a C-47 Skytrain. The pilots are fighting the coastal fog and storm clouds to try to gain visibility of our Drop Zone, the engines screaming as we climb higher and higher into the predawn sky. Pathfinders dropped in an hour ago to mark our drop zones with the Eureka's paired with their Krypton lights and Aldis lamps. Those are some brave men. Braver than us to drop in first, alone, without backup into enemy territory—more guts than most.

“Shuffle forward, check, and count off!”

“One okay!”

“Two okay!”

“Three okay!”

Because I'm in the back, the Jumpmaster'll check my chute for me when it's my turn to jump.

“Remember boys, take a deep breath and jump. If your chute don’t open by the time you count to four, pull your reserve!”

The pilots are yellin’ and cursin’ about the fire we’re taking from the anti-aircraft guns below and the search lights blinding them. They’re flying blind, duckin’ and dodgin’. We stand in the door hooked up and ready to jump, all eyes glued on the darkened jump-light. The Jumpmaster looks over our heads once, twice, until the pilot flips the switch, and the light flares to life, splashing around the tiny bay, baptizing us for war. I watch from the back as the Jumpmaster grabs hold of the safety strap. The cold, damp air rushes in, bringing with it smells from outside the plane. I look around at my boys, then I look again. This feels familiar, like I’ve been here before.

“GO! GO! GO!”

I count ‘em off; 1, 2, 3, 4... 15 men between me and the door.

5, 6, 7, 8, 9... 10 men between me and the door.

Mama cried when I enlisted in the Army. My sisters all looked like caught fish with their mouths hanging open. Elbert wasn’t surprised, but he helped me enlist; then he enlisted and sent Mama into a fit.

10, 11, 12... 7 men between me and the door.

I try to keep my mind from focusing on the door. I think about Christmas, about how Jemma and Viola would pop the corn kernels, pick and dry berries and make long strings of ‘em to go on the tree and around the house.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Many lost a son, a father, a brother, a husband, a friend. Good men died that day. American blood mixed

with the blue waters and the black oil rushing to the surface. People screamed, cried, and clung together in fear. They attacked my country and spilled the blood of my country-men. Germany declared war on us. I enlisted to save lives, to get this war over with so we could all go back to our lives as best we can.

15, 16, 17, 18... 1 man between me and the door.

Charlie is shakin' and wringin' his hands.  
He's thrown up twice.

"Let's go, boys!"

Charlie's bucking at the door like it's a big damn gator snappin' at him. If I don't get him, the Jumpmaster will. Either way he's going out that door—no place for fear of the door. Jumpmaster's fixin' to be all over him.

"NOW! GO!"

"C'mon, Charlie. the boys are waiting."

"JUMP! GO!"

I grab Charlie by the shoulder and gun belt and throw his ass out the door, praying his chute opens. I hear him give a holler on the way down. I stand in the door while the Jumpmaster checks my chute.

"Tyler, 20, GO!"

"Goin'!"

I take that deep breath and burst out the door after my boys. Hell rises up to meet me, the air exploding around me. The cold wind bites deep despite the layers of clothing. Wisps of cloud fly past me, fly above me, as I fall toward the dark earth below. I look down and I see the Devil's handiwork as flames dance below me while black smoke curls and climbs higher. I watch one of our -47's and its men break apart, the wings folding in on themselves like

one of my sisters' paper dolls caught in the rain. I feel my eyes get warm and tears come running down; if three or four of those men escape, they'll be damn lucky. I can imagine the chaos inside the bay as the men fight to stay on their feet, fight to get out the door, fight the tangled chute lines. I can hear the Jumpmaster yelling above the panic, screams and prayers of those who know they have seconds left to ask for forgiveness, ask for a quick death, and to apologize to those waiting at home for them. I live through this—have lived through this—I'll tell my granddaughter, or did I tell her—

I'll tell her the ones who didn't come back, they're the heroes.

I watch the plane turn and spin in midair, head over tail. I smell the fumes and smoke off the plane and the used ammunition. I watch in helpless wonder and fear as the plane explodes, sending pieces of everything flying everywhere among the German fireworks. The force of the explosion engulfs me—I shut my eyes against the sensation. I feel the sound ripple through me. It shakes every bone in my body and causes my heart to skip a beat and jump back into action.

*One-one thousand:*

The farm in Starke, Florida was my daddy's afore he died. I was three or four when the good Lord called him home. I used to get up in the mornings and build and light the fires in the fire places around the house, then wake up mama. I'd slop the pigs, feed the horses, muck the stables, feed and milk the cows, feed the chickens, and collect the eggs. I hope mama and my sisters can handle their chores plus mine and Elbert's, and I don't mind saying me and Elbert will have plenty to fix when we get back.

*Two-one thousand:*

Mama's afraid I won't come back. I'll admit

there's that chance. But I asked the good Lord to watch over me, told him I put myself in his hands, and whether he decides to see me through this or take me home will be up to him. I spent one year in the infantry, kept stateside shining shoes and running drills until a set of sergeants came clipin' in asking for volunteers for a parachute regiment. I passed all my tests, did all my practice jumps, and earned my silver wings.

*Three-one thousand:*

I'm still dropping without the ground meeting my sight. I'm falling, rocketing down faster and faster. The pilots were supposed to drop us at 600 feet; I reckon they dropped us farther up. I can't see the lights from the Pathfinders up this far, if those men got 'em down at all. This place is crawling with German soldiers commanded by Rommel himself. We all knew what we were jumping into. Come hell or high water, we're to take Normandy from the Krauts. We're to take every inch of ground from them and never give it back. I reckon we can do that.

*Four-one thousand:*

RESERVE, RESERVE!

I hear that reassuring crack as my chute pops open above my head. The ground still isn't comin' at me. Above the blaring rockets and gun fire, above the rush of the wind, above the roar of the plane engines and explosions, I can hear someone talking to me, something about "Paul" and "Daddy." I grip my .38 a little tighter and clench my teeth. The wind is playing tricks on me.

I look around and I can see the white parachutes of men for miles and miles, outlined and illuminated against the dark Normandy sky. Search lights from below swing in a wild motion catching some of the guys farther down. I can hear the gun

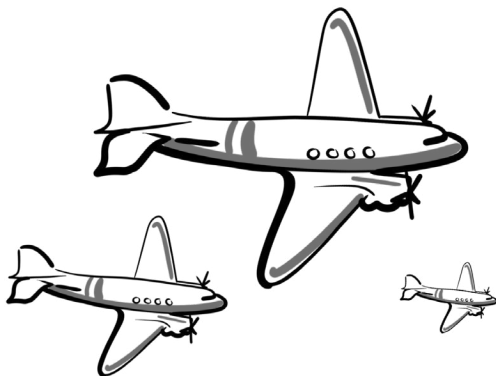
fire. And the return fire as the boys meet the ground. Might be some of my men.

Down, and down, and down I fall and still no ground in sight. I take a deep breath. Inhaling the smells of burnt oil and gas and count again:

*One-one thousand . . .*

*Two-one thousand . . .*

*by Shelby Phillips*



Note to my gentle readers: There are deliberate distortions of what Paul Tyler is seeing and experiencing; however, much of what the paratroopers, and what my Papa (granddad), saw and heard during this legendary jump is based on my Papa's brief accounts and my own readings about the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II. Paul Tyler passed away at home on the night of May 14th, 2015. He was 88 years old.

*\*Content Warning: Descriptions of War*

